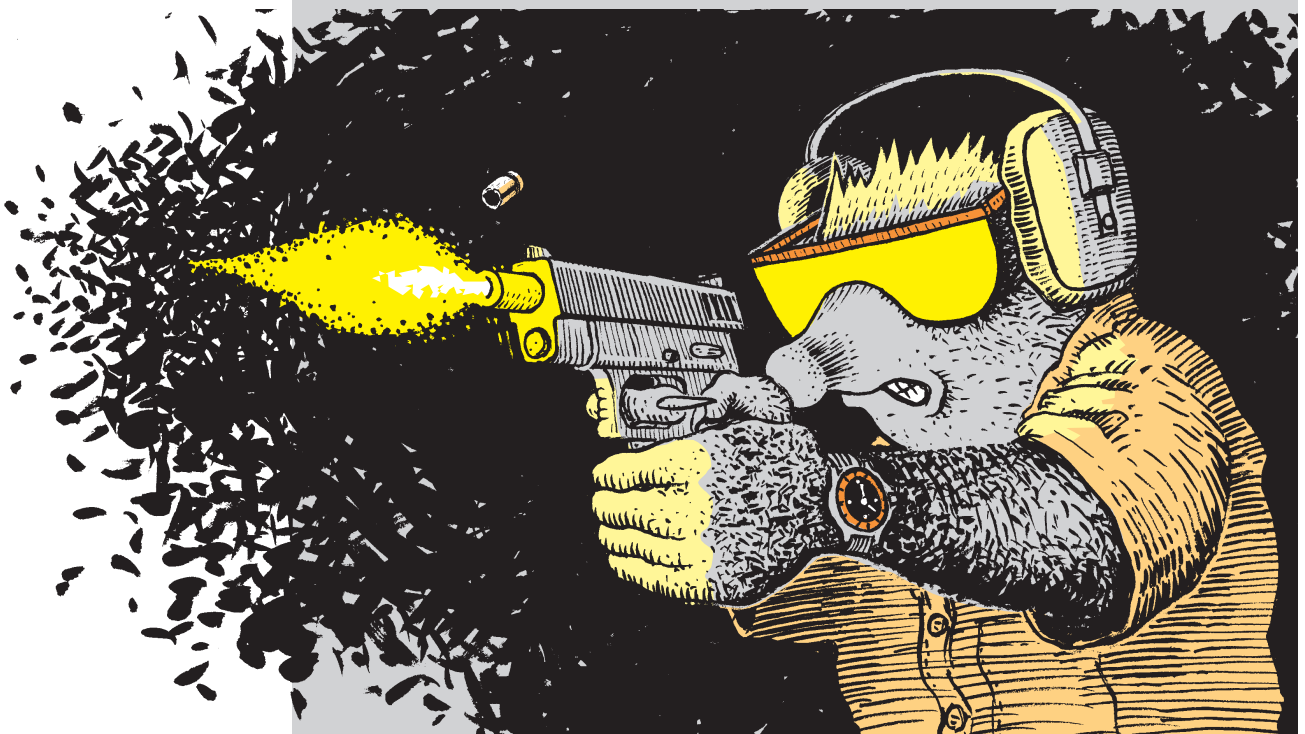


**From the World Wide Web and the pages  
of the Sydney City Hub ...**

# Rumours of Bruce

PLUS ...

**A Christmas card from Bruce  
AND The Great Crusade**



**Nick B. Possum  
Private Eye**

[www.brushtail.com.au](http://www.brushtail.com.au)



'Rumours of Bruce' was first published on the Nick Possum Home Page in late 1998 and subsequently serialised in Nick's column, 'Whispers from the mean streets', in the *Sydney City Hub*, a weekly café paper circulating in inner Sydney. 'A Christmas card from Bruce' began in the *Hub* on 21 December 2000, but publication of the full adventure was interrupted by the sad demise of the *Hub* in a miasma of weirdness, treachery and amphetamines in January 2001 (*The Hub* was revived, as a monthly, late in 2001). The first three episodes of 'The Great Crusade' were published in *The Chaser*, and the last on the Nick Possum Home Page. Nick is now back in the *Hub*.

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## Rumours of Bruce

■ November 1998

Sometimes, late at night, after a few ciders, I think of Bruce Possum.

It is ten years since he disappeared. The memories are fuzzy now, but when I want to sharpen them I lock the gate downstairs, switch on the answering machine, and take the old Browning 9 mm semi-automatic pistol out of the safe.

The Parabellum is a classic weapon, never fundamentally improved since John Moses Browning designed it in 1911.

I have never fired it in anger. It's still where Bruce left it in his old tin box, carefully wrapped in the oily, faded, tie-dyed teeshirt he bought in 1970 at the Surry Hills Arts Factory. It lies there with his 'It's Time' badge from the '72 election, the ticket stubs from *Hair*, and the snapshot of himself with Bob Dylan at the disastrous Showground concert of April '78. Bruce's last communication is still taped to the lid: "So long partner. Have gone to Afghanistan. Sorry. Will make it up to you. Keep the gat".

The other night I unwrapped the Browning, stripped it down, cleaned it, oiled it, and reassembled it. Memories can be dangerous things, but sometimes you need to take the risk, and it's a ritual that helps me remember.

*Safety first. Make sure the gun is unloaded. Remove the magazine, pull the slide back, lock it in the open position. Check that the chamber is empty.*

From time to time there have been rumours. Once, in '91, I got a call from a woman who wouldn't leave her name: "You're looking for Bruce", the voice said, "I've just seen him, he's in George Street, outside the Town Hall". She hung up.

I raced downstairs and hailed a cab. When I arrive, there was just the Wilderness Society koala hassling passers-by for money. Was it a cruel hoax? had Bruce really been there? and who was the woman anyway?

The last rumour came in March when Tony forwarded an email sent to him by a Ukrainian cyberpal in Athens:

"I am reliably informed rumour that possum of Australian type name of Bryce or Bruce maybe was in Kurdistan training obscure minority rebels group in guerilla warfare. He was underbid by clown who works for Russian nationalists of Zhirinovski and is pulled off operation through half-way. This possum is not since seen, as far I know.

**Memories can be dangerous things, but sometimes you need to take the risk, and it's a ritual that helps me remember.**



“Russian was supposed broker arms deal and training troops, but this man absconds with money. It was about a million US dollar. The Kalashnikovs never arrive, rebels are crushed and many peoples is dead. There is no moral this story.”

Well, maybe not, I thought.

***Release the slide and ease it forward. Facing the muzzle of the pistol, press the recoil spring plug inwards until the barrel bushing is free to be twisted clockwise ... completely uncover the recoil spring plug. Carefully, carefully, it's under pressure.***

On most days you forget the missing. You wander on through life. But then some skerrick of evidence, or hope, intrudes. A half-baked theory, a tentative sighting and you're propelled into a disturbing frenzy of inquiry and speculation that leads nowhere. And then one night you go to sleep and the next day you've forgotten. Or maybe not. Maybe the missing are held just below the surface, pressing on your subconscious.

I met Bruce at a party in somebody's seedy flatette on Glebe Point Road, sometime in the late sixties. There were big flagons of cheap riesling and claret, fat red candles, smoking joss sticks, yellow caliopsis flowers stuck in Bols gin bottles, Aubrey Beardsley posters, vinyl bean bags and a stunning girl with marmalade-coloured hair who assiduously avoided me.

Bruce Possum and I hit it off straight away and we started in the private eye game a couple of weeks after the party. I think it was that he had an easy confidence with humans I knew I lacked. You could walk into the laundromat and start stuffing your washing into the machine and you'd turn around and Bruce'd be chatting intimately to some girl he'd never met before, or an old pensioner. The common touch. I could never do that, or at least, not then.

Bruce had trained as a cop, but he dropped out after less than a year. I never did find out exactly why. He hinted darkly about prejudices against marsupials in the force and then changed the subject. He was into dope, and LSD on occasions, but I held back; something stopped me.

We did some cheap and nasty celebrity matrimonial investigations and then a couple of pieces of background research for the old *Nation review* that made us a slightly famous. Most people assumed we were brothers, but this might have been because, as the girls said, all possums are grey in the dark.

These were the years of the marsupial self-respect renaissance and the Vietnam war; the years of bell-bottom pants, draft resistance and protest marches.

Possums were socially exotic then and we were invited to all the parties. You could go to the pub after work, bump into somebody you knew from the Sydney Push and end up at a demimondaine bash where young Germaine Greer would be holding court in a blouse open to the waist and Paddy McGuinness, just back from his London job with the Moscow Narodny Bank, and dressed in a sort of caftan, would be gibbering on about socialism and science fiction to Liz Fell.

I got asked to do celebrity private eye spots on radio and more work rolled in. If I had truly embraced that scene I might now be rich and famous or at least very well-off and mildly notorious, but something kept pulling me back.

Bruce's dad had been a builder's labourer and had brought him up as a lefty, but I sensed Bruce's allegiance was always more tribal than cerebral.

Sometime in the late 70s—in the Fraser years—I noticed a change in him. There were linguistic markers. Suddenly the word 'loser' became his favourite perjorative. He began to refer to himself as a 'security consultant' and me as his 'business associate'. He began to talk about 'market forces', 'optimised product mix', 'excellence', 'core business' and 'world's best practice'.

In 1978 he brought himself a chrome-plated .44 magnum revolver. The calibre had been popularised by Clint Eastwood and it became the favourite accessory of white macho



cops. It was one of the new generation of high-powered revolvers. I had always felt that revolvers were crude and dumb technology but Bruce used to say the magnum was “leveraged to move fast”. The Harvard MBA jargon had become an obsession with him.

The big gun was ugly, bulky and primitive. It had more muzzle velocity than his old Browning automatic, but so what? It couldn't fire as fast and it had less than half the magazine capacity. I just couldn't see the point. And there was an aesthetic thing: the magnum had none of the cool elegance of the Browning.

Bruce reckoned there was big money in ‘security consultancy’, ‘competitor profiling’, ‘risk management’, ‘staff security clearance’ and ‘business intelligence’ ... which was just a euphemism for industrial espionage. This was territory into which I just couldn't follow him. It was all going to happen in Western Australia, he said, and he went to Perth on an extended business reconnaissance trip in '82.

*Next step: remove the recoil spring plug and the recoil spring from the gun. Cock the hammer to the full-cock position. Remember: never, ever, to the half-cock. OK: pull the slide to the rear 'till the slide release lever is aligned with the little circular notch on the left of the slide.*

We had a bad row in '83. Bruce had gone over to Perth again. The business was short of cash, so I sold the rights to the name “Nick and Bruce Possum” to a bunch of naive do-gooders in Redfern called Streetwize Comics and I did some work for them as a script consultant on street life. They were just trying to help kids understand about the law, the police, sex and drugs, but Bruce was furious when he found out. It demeaned him, he said, and he called me a loser.

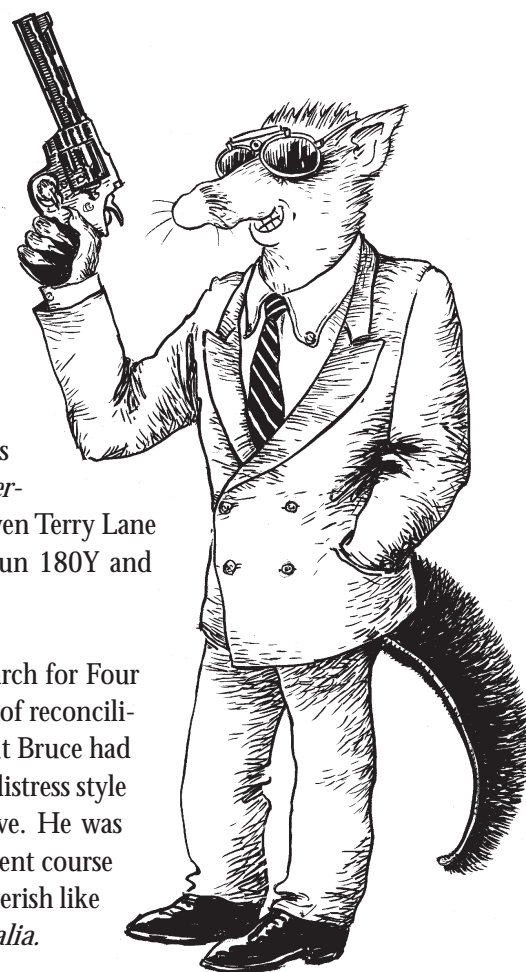
It was after the row over the Streetwize Comics deal that Bruce went to Perth “for good”. The West was the land of opportunity, he said. We had been talking about opening a Perth branch of the business, but when he got there he went into business for himself and called it Magnum Corporate Security.

Brian Burke's Labor Government had just been elected. They immediately got into bed with the fast money and Bruce was right there with them – leveraged to move fast. Soon he was hanging round with Laurie Connell, Alan Bond and Terry Burke.

Back in Sydney, the eighties were a bad time for me. Work seemed to disappear and I realised that Bruce had brought in so much of it. Chris Murphy attacked me in his column in the *Sun Herald*. The celebrity PI thing dried up completely. Even Terry Lane stopped having me on his show. I sold the Datsun 180Y and moved back into the ceiling above the office.

**Bruce used to say the magnum was “leveraged to move fast”. The Harvard MBA jargon had become an obsession with him.**

I went over to Perth to do some background research for Four Corners in '87. I rang up Bruce and we had a sort of reconciliation. ‘WA Inc.’ was really on the nose by then, but Bruce had a trendy office in Subiaco decorated in the urban distress style and a big mediterranean flat in Peppermint Grove. He was driving a gold Mercedes Sports, doing a management course at Murdoch University and reading corporate gibberish like Stoner, Collins and Yetton's *Management in Australia*.





He took me to the races for the running of the Laurie Connell Cup and introduced me to Laurie himself. There were speeches about Laurie's great contribution to racing and I remember Laurie's wife wore a navy-blue and white pleated twinset and a pillbox hat and there was this curious thing – Laurie spent the afternoon clutching a big cardboard box under his arm. I remember, because I was sitting almost next to him in the gutter just outside the bar. It seemed a strange place for a man of his position to be hanging out. I realised later that the box might have contained the missing \$400 million in small unmarked notes.

Bruce was very matey with Laurie and he kept jabbering on about plans to expand into Thailand, Malaysia, South Africa and the Arab Emirates.

"Power is an aphrodisiac", he said to me that day. I remember thinking, "Wanker". It was a funny thing about Bruce and women. He was always surrounded by women but it never seemed to go anywhere. He went after women he couldn't have but he always seemed more comfortable with men.



**Bruce turned up on my doorstep, late at night, with a couple of suitcases. He had folded Magnum Corporate Security he said, and he really didn't want to talk about it.**

*Now: push the axis of the slide release lever from the right side of the gun towards the left side. The slide release lever will pop out ... pull it completely off the frame of the gun.*

Then it all fell apart. Laurie Connell's bank crashed in '88. A few days before it went down, Bruce turned up on my doorstep, late at night, with a couple of suitcases. He had folded Magnum Corporate Security he said, and he really didn't want to talk about it. He looked rumpled and worn. He said he had no cash, so I paid the taxi driver.

It was an awkward situation and I busied myself with details. I got out the old camp bed, set it up in a corner of the office, and fetched a six-pack of cider from the fridge. Bruce had a kind of half-sheepish, half-defiant manner so I just asked about his flight over, and the weather in Perth.

He was still asleep when I went out the next morning and he was gone when I got back – which set the pattern for the next few days.

The next day he started making cryptic phone calls to mysterious 'business associates' – always using the yellow phone in the Brushtail Café. Joadja said he called some of his old girlfriends, but they were all tied up. He always phoned out. Nobody ever rang him. When he went out, he caught a cab from the corner of the lane.

Then, when he was gone, I got half a dozen weird phone calls. Somebody called and hung up when I answered. The little inner voice of marsupial paranoia insisted I should take the Browning when I went out. I told Bruce, but he shrugged and said it was probably just some idiot kid. I was being paranoid, he said. I ignored him and thumbed a dozen rounds into the magazine.

I was over in the pub, the next day, when a couple of characters from the lumpenproletariat followed me into the toilet and asked if I was Bruce. "Laurie needs his



**I pinned his neck against the wall with the possum grip and introduced them to the Browning.**



money back. It was only a loan”, the uglier one said.

I told him he had the wrong possum.

“How would you like us to skin your fucking tail so you look like a rat?” He asked.

I kicked him in the nuts and he fell to the floor and twisted, groaning, into the foetal position. His mate took a swing at me but lost his balance. I pinned his neck against the wall with the possum grip and introduced them to the Browning. They apologised profusely for the misunderstanding, so I left.

When I got back to the office Bruce was there. “A pair of debt collectors are looking for you”, I said. “What the hell did you get up to over there?”

“That’s on a need-to-know basis and you don’t need to know”, he replied.

“You bastard! If I hadn’t had the Browning with me I’d be spitting blood and teeth down the toilet bowl.”

“Look, sorry, It’s a communications breakdown. I’m working on something big. I’ve had a big offer. I’ll fix up the Sandgropers. I’ll talk to Laurie. It’ll be okay”.

“What’s this deal? Is it a hundred per cent legal?”

“Absolutely. But I can’t tell you yet. I’ve got a meeting tomorrow.”

I wasn’t convinced. “I hope you’re carrying that bloody artillery piece of yours. If Laurie’s boys catch up with you, you might need to wave it at them”, I said.

“I left the magnum in Perth. Couldn’t carry it over on the plane with me, could I? Don’t worry. It’s me you’re talking to. I can look after myself”.

He stayed in that night and picked through some of his old stuff he’d left in a couple of boxes when he went to Perth. He spent a long time looking through photo albums and press clippings from the early days of the private eye business. He paused over faded old snaps: the two of us in bell-bottom velvet suits, Cuban-heel boots and blue granny glasses; the old office on Pyrmont Bridge Road; himself with Mike Willessee when Mike was wonderful; a barbecue in somebody’s backyard in Stanmore; with the girls at Bondi Beach; in uniform with his dad at his graduation from the Goulburn Police College; with a Viet Cong flag at the first Vietnam Moratorium march in 1970.

The next night when I came home, he wasn’t there and I’ve never seen him again. His suitcases were still parked next to the camp bed and the old tin box with his message was sitting on my desk. “So long partner. Have gone to Afghanistan. Sorry. Will make it up to you. Keep the gat”.



***Hold the gun upside down, push the slide forward and remove it from the frame. Now, remove the recoil spring guide.***

***Facing the muzzle of the barrel again, twist the barrel bushing anti-clockwise and pull it out. Move the barrel link forward towards the muzzle and remove the barrel from the front opening of the slide.***

The old Browning pistol lay in pieces now, carefully arranged on the tee-shirt. I picked up the barrel and peered through it towards the light. The rifling grooves spiralled away from me, gleaming reassuringly. I smeared a little gun oil on each part then I went to the fridge for a cider. A fridge magnet from Magnum Corporate Security was still stuck to the door and Bruce's smiling face mocked me. "Where are you, you bastard? Why don't you just tell me you're dead?" I thought.

***Now, reassemble the gun in reverse order.***

Maybe if I'd had it out with Bruce when he came back from Perth he'd still be here. Maybe I should have yelled at the bastard. Was I just pleased that his hubris had brought him undone? I don't think so. I know I was terribly embarrassed for him more than anything.

To him, I was probably just a hopeless loser he'd had to fall back on in an emergency. He was gambling for very high stakes and he felt he still had chips to play with.

I reassembled the barrel in the slide and fitted the slide release lever back onto the frame of the pistol.

Perhaps, I thought, if I'd confronted his bullshit back in the late '70s – argued every point with him. But I was really swimming against the current then. He was borrowing John Laws' yacht, and hanging out with Piers Ackerman, and calling Richo "Mate". Every newspaper, almost every pundit, every second academic, every politician, nine-tenths of the talk-back radio jocks were swimming with the tide. They were singing a siren song to Bruce. Their chorus drowned me out.

And, thinking back on it, I *did* argue things out with him, or I tried. He walked out of the office one day in a black rage after a row about Margaret Thatcher and the miners and I didn't like to push it after that. We had a business to run ... until he left for WA.

I compressed the recoil spring and twisted the barrel bushing back into position.

Perhaps if I'd started in the early years. I had sensed from the beginning that Bruce was dangerously impressionable. He was completely taken in by the Sydney Push. In later years he even claimed he'd had an affair with Germaine Greer but the story never made much sense. Dozens of males reckoned they had an affair with Germaine. Bruce was all lustrous grey fur and macho charm but as far as I could remember, Germaine was in England at the time and even in her counterculture groupie period she never went for possums.

The problem was that Bruce combined impressionability with an intuition about people, about their motivations. It often seemed he could tell what they were thinking before they had thought it. It was frightening really. And I relied on that. That intuition made us a team. Perhaps it was that Bruce's intellectual impressionability gave him a window on the mind of most of the people we dealt with.

The magazine slid back into the Browning with a satisfying click. I laid the gun down on the tie-dyed tee-shirt.

Is there, I wondered, some corner of a Kurdistani field that is forever Possum Gully? Or did the lumpens I chatted with in the pub grab Bruce on his way back to the office the next night? Did they dump his naked carcass on the edge of the F3 for the Main Roads maintenance crew to dispose of next day?

Maybe, right now, Bruce is propped up against the bar in some rotting Khrushchev-era hotel in Baku, drinking English cider on somebody's expense account and plotting sleazy get-rich-quick schemes with the scumbags from Sandline.



I wish it were true, but I reckon if he was there, he could not have resisted the impulse to send me a postcard, a fax, an email.

What does it matter anyway? Every year thirty thousand people go missing in Australia ... one every 18 minutes. Mostly they're teenagers and mostly they turn up within a month.

Then there are the others. And the parents and friends and lovers who can never bury the dead and tie off the loose ends.

Reverently I folded the old Browning in the oily tee-shirt and put it back in the tin box. The throbbing silence of the city was punctuated by distant drunken voices and the squeal of tyres. It was 2.05 am. I went to the fridge and opened another cider.





# A Christmas card from Bruce

■ December 2000

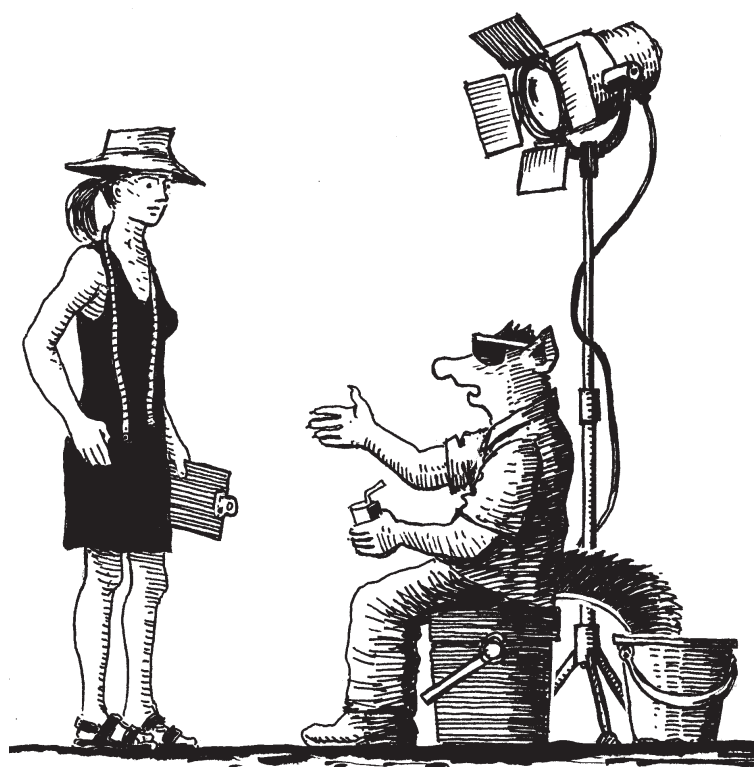
*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi.*

Pliny the Elder, 23–79 AD

It was murderously hot in Perth and something like a hundred film extras were pouring sweat under hot production lights and trying to look cool.

But not me. I watched from the shade with an Esky full of chilled apple juice and my tail in a bucket of iced water.

I had flown to the other side to act as a specialist adviser on the set of *Let's Get Skase*, which is expected to hit the big screen in the middle of 2001. Not many PIs were ever on the Skase case but I was involved pretty much from the beginning – in fact, I got involved while Chris 'The Dentist' Skase was still being feted by the media as a new-wave business genius.



**“In the scribbling game, almost everybody fundamentally accepts the system ...”**

I snapped out my daze. It was a young woman from the wardrobe crew.

“I reckon the whole system acted in Skase’s favour”, I said. “Firstly, you have to understand the ethos of business journalism. In the scribbling game, almost everybody fundamentally accepts the system. There are no Marxists writing for the mainstream dailies or appearing on TV; there are no opponents of the system who might take a great delight in pointing to its most basic lunacies. For that matter, even radical critics who believe in the

Special adviser to a low-budget Aussie drama is not the sort of gig a cheap detective gets rich on, but anything that might explain the subsequent debacle – the total failure of the Australian Government to bring Skase to justice – is a worthy cause. So I charged them just \$100 a day plus expenses and they put me up in a cheap motel.

When I wasn’t needed on set I snooped around Perth, trying to find answers to the disappearance of my former business partner, Bruce Possum, who hasn’t been reliably seen since the collapse of Laurie Connell’s bank, all those years ago.

But for now it was like a furnace on set and everything was bathed in the soporific dry heat and harsh white light of a Perth summer. I took another swig of apple juice and drifted into a reverie.

“How did it happen? Why didn’t anybody stop what was going on before the bastard ran away?”



system are rarer than altruists in the used car business.

“So most journalists look at it this way: a business enterprise may be very dodgy, but it would be disloyal to the system to call it a real dog. If you did that, you might make things worse ... you might even bring about its collapse. Hell, if you talk it up, it might even trade its way out of trouble. Far better then, to be a booster, or at the most, a gentle and helpful critic. That way you set yourself up with an alibi: if the thing goes belly-up, you can either attack the sceptics for wrecking a wonderful venture, or you can point to the fact that you were a critic ... and, of course, you might have been a sterner critic, if all the shameful facts had been known to you, at the time ... blah, blah.

“You could sum up the dominant ethos of journalism this way: if the bastard gets away with it he’s a hero and an entrepreneur. On the other hand if he looks like he’s about to go belly-up, somebody’ll pluck up the courage to be bitchy, and then a cautious criticism will begin, and then, a few days out from disaster, there might be a hue and cry. So, for all most of the public knew, Skase was the brilliant entrepreneur they’d been told he was ... until the moment he ran away with the money.”

“Gee, you’re pretty cynical”, she said, looking a bit stunned.

“I have lived a long time, and seen all these things before. I expect to see them again”, I said, suddenly feeling old and cynical.

“Go ahead, make your day”, invited the ad in *The West Australian*. It showed a comely young lass in a skimpy halter top smiling over her shoulder at the camera and pointing a big stainless steel pistol down range. The Lone Ranges Shooting Complex was, the ad claimed, Australia’s safest. Christmas gift vouchers were now available.

Why not? I thought. You can’t get on a range this easily in Sydney and you never know when you’ll need to dispatch a dog or something. Hell, I hadn’t worked out with the Browning since before the Operation Gareth debacle. In fact I hadn’t even held it in my paw since the night Frank Sartor was arrested putting up election posters.

I drove my rented shitbox down the Farmer Freeway, over the Swan, and turned off for the industrial streets of Belmont. I found Lone Ranges right across the street from Rentokil, and next door to a curtain shop. There were half a dozen cars parked outside: a couple of pocket rockets, three 4WDs and an elderly Kingswood ute with a faded bumper sticker that said “Keep This Our Flag Forever”. A white bull terrier was tied up in the shade with a length of polyprop rope. It growled as I passed.

There was a heavy drift of yellow sand and dead leaves across the doormat but the sign on the door said “OPEN”. I pushed it open and walked into the foyer. A Eureka flag hung on the back wall next to a poster for Heckler and Koch handguns. Under the glass countertop a range of semi-automatics were on display: Glocks, H&Ks, Brownings; black and bulky, with prices starting around a thousand bucks. Three or four christmas cards were propped up next to the computer.

I had expected to be asked for my driver’s licence, but the procedure was simpler than signing into an RSL Club. At the counter an old bloke with a ruddy face and white hair handed me a clipboard and asked for my name, address, signature. There were already three names on the sheet. The signatures were just casual squiggly lines.

I sat down at the cheap pine table to read the rules. A couple of Chopper Read wannabes – hulking young men with shaved heads and goatee beards – sat at the next table drinking coke and talking guns. There was a faint smell of cordite and the loud flat crack of handguns came from behind the wall.

I told the old bloke I’d like to do fifty rounds with the 9mm Browning. He said it would be \$55 cash and a \$50 deposit – refundable if I returned all the cartridge cases. I paid in cash and he led me through to the range and showed me into a booth. He swung the steel



door shut, locked it from the outside and left me alone. A couple of minutes later he tapped on the window and shoved a nice new Browning, two magazines, and a box of cartridges into the safety box on the door.

I loaded the magazines, clicked one in place, released the slide and hefted the weapon in my paw. Nicely balanced; satisfying potent mass. I assumed the stance and tried three rounds in quick succession then I reeled the target back. The first was a bullseye, but the others were way off to the right.

OK, no point banging them off too fast. Get into a steady rhythm. Synchronise your breathing. Count down the shots as you fire them.

The spent cartridges bounced off the padded walls and clinked around at my feet.

“Nice tight group”, the man said, looking at my fourth target, when he came to let me out. “We don’t see many possums these days. There was a bloke looked a bit like you, used to come to the range with his own .44 Magnum. Hung out with Laurie Connell’s boys ... it must be ten or twelve years ago”.

“That might have been my business partner, Bruce Possum. I haven’t heard from him in about that long”, I said.

“Funny thing, out of the blue we got a Christmas card from him ... or I think it was him”.

My heart nearly missed a beat. “Wouldn’t mind having a look at one of these .40 calibre Glocks”, I said, hoping to create a diversion.

“Yeah, righto, I’ll get one out” he said. He walked towards the back of the foyer. I reached for the Christmas cards. Two were of no interest but the other had an African scene with mountains and wildebeest. Inside there were a few scrawled lines signed “Bruce”. I folded it and shoved it into my back pocket just before the man came back to the counter with the Glock. I asked the price, expressed a vague interest, thanked him for going to the trouble, and left.

It was 36 degrees outside and the car was like a furnace. I didn’t stop to look at the card. The idea that Bruce Possum might be alive somewhere in Africa was almost too weird to handle. I needed to drink a very cold cider in a dark air-conditioned room.

When I got back to the motel I closed the curtains to shut out the white glare of the Perth afternoon and I was ready to face whatever it all meant. From my back pocket I extracted the Christmas card, unfolded it and smoothed it out.

It was not strictly speaking a Christmas card. It was one of those all-purpose cards. On the inside the printed text said “Greetings from the Old Africa Hotel, Dar es Salaam”, together with an address and phone number.

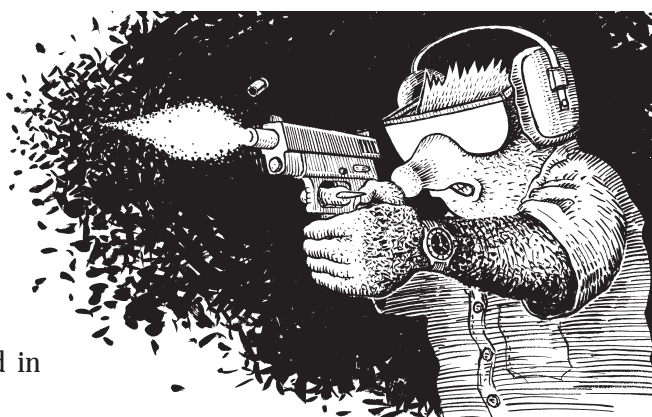
The message was scrawled in blue biro:

“Hi fellas ! Long time no see. Saw your ad in a copy of *The West Australian* somebody brought in from Perth. It certainly made my Christmas !!! Who’s the young spunk in the photo? Best wishes ... Bruce the ‘Dick’”.

There was no date and no contact details and nothing in the words proved it was Bruce Possum. “Bruce the ‘Dick’”? Maybe “Dick” meant detective, or maybe it just meant that the writer never got his hand off it.

I searched through the ancient letters and documents jammed in the back of my old

**OK, no point  
banging them off  
too fast. Get into  
a steady rhythm.  
Synchronise  
your breathing.  
Count down the  
shots as you fire  
them.**





**“Evenin’ Podner! Don’t see many possums in Dar. Whatcha doin’ here?” asked a balding middle-aged American sitting next to me.**

shot, but there was nothing else for it: I’d have to pick up the trail at the Old Africa Hotel.

After the furnace of Perth and the cool dry aircon on the plane, the sweltering heat of East Africa hit me like a hammer. It was New Year’s Eve, my tail was cramped, my pelt was limp and greasy and I hadn’t slept in twenty four hours.

Dar’s airport was twenty kilometres from the city, and I caught a taxi in. It was a rattling old Peugeot 504, driven by a gloomy African who told me his name was Hamad. “Don’ see many possums these parts. What you come for?” He asked. I told him I was a journalist working on a tourism story.

I had imagined the Old Africa Hotel as a graceful colonial era pile near the waterfront. It was near the sea all right, but it was a charmless late sixties slab with a big concrete awning over the driveway. My plan was to go in cold and check how I was received, so I hadn’t booked ahead. If they didn’t see many possums, they might remark on another.

The Indian woman who booked me in was impassive, professional and correct. Yes, they had a room. How long would I be staying? “Until the next millennium” I said, in a corny Bruce-ish sort of way. She smiled politely at my little joke, but there was no flicker of recognition, so I told her I’d start with three days. Some cards like Bruce had sent were displayed for sale.

I hung around my room til dusk, trying to sleep off my jetlag, then I went down for a drink. The Waterhole Bar was decorated with tribal masks and the resident creatures looked up from their drinks as I came into view – the usual species you find at African watering holes: clapped-out stringers, expatriate geologists and import-export hustlers.

There were not many of them; perhaps half a dozen white men, two or three prosperous-looking Africans and a couple of bar girls. I sat down at a stool. The barman looked at me coolly. I asked for a cider and put it on my bill.

“Evenin’ Podner! Don’t see many possums in Dar. Whatcha doin’ here?” asked a balding middle-aged American sitting next to me. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and hand-tooled cowboy boots. Rayban sunglasses hung from a cord around his neck.

“Funny you should ask”, I said, introducing myself. “I’m here doing a story for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. You’d be from Texas, right?”

“Name’s Porktree, Joshua Porktree ... and you’re darn right, Possum. Howdja know?”

“Something about your accent”, I muttered.

“So whatya writin’ ’bout?”

“It’s a fluffy lifestyle thing on expatriate Australian Possums in Africa”.

Filofax and found just one sample of Bruce’s handwriting – a note on a torn off scrap of paper signed “B”. Yes the handwriting on the card was unnervingly similar and the B was almost the same.

Assuming it was my long-lost business partner, why had he chosen to break a twelve year silence with a Chrissy card to some Perth pistol shooters he can hardly have known? On the other hand, perhaps they were the last contacts he had in Australia – apart from me. So many of his old associates were now dead: Laurie Connell, Lang Hancock, Robert Holmes a Court. Of the living, Chris Skase was holed up in Majorca and Alan Bond was lying low in London ... and if they had a card from Bruce they weren’t about to tell me.

And so I found myself on an Air Emirates flight from Singapore into Dar es Salaam. It was a long



“Well I don’t know you got a whole lot to write ’bout there, ’cept I recall a guy like you used to come in here time-to-time. Name of Bryce or something. We howdied, but we never shook.”

“You don’t say! Sounds like the sort of possum I need to talk to ... where would I contact him?” I asked, not believing my luck.

“Said he was working on security for the Fortitude Mine up by Lake Victoria but I ain’t seen him here in months. Far as I was concerned he was as full of wind as a corn-eatin’ horse.”

“In what sense?”

“Heard him brag a goddam lot about his contacts. The way he told it he was on first-name terms with Robert Mugabe and Laurent Kabila, but that don’t figure ... why would he be hangin’ out in a fleapit hotel like this?”

“Why indeed”. I shrugged noncommittally, but Porktree’s braggard sounded exactly like Bruce Possum. I had a mental picture of Bruce leaning on the bar, bullshitting the locals. It’s funny how things work out, I thought. You can spend years methodically searching for leads, and then, when you least expect it, you stumble on one by accident, and the investigation turns fruitful.

Porktree, it turned out, was a geologist working for an Australian mining company. I asked him how one got to the Fortitude Mine. He was happy to oblige. I brought him a drink and we toasted George Dubya Bush’s forthcoming elevation to the presidency. “Dubya’s gonna kick ass. He’s gonna tell ’em it’s time to paint their goddam butts white and run with the antelope”, Joshua said.

It was eight o’clock before I thanked him and took my leave. He was still bearing the White Man’s Burden but I was hungry and jetlag was setting in again.

Apart from an African guard near the front door and the Indian woman at reception, the hotel foyer was deserted. The glass doors to the restaurant were taped over with old newspapers and a sign that said “CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS – Old Africa Hotel Regrets Any Inconvenience Caused – Room Service Meals are Available”. I ordered a fruit platter at the counter, picked up the hire car leaflets and a map of Tanzania and went back to my room, where I booked myself on the morning plane to Mwanza.

Except for the receptionist and an African vacuuming the carpet the foyer was still deserted when I checked out. The receptionist told me there’d be no trouble getting a room in the next few days. A cab was waiting in the hotel driveway. It whisked me to the airport for a few shillingi. It was a glorious day for flying. The Serengeti Plain stretched out below us. To the north the snow-capped peak of Kilimanjaro loomed out of a light morning haze, like the images of Africa in my childhood story-books.

After the oppressive heat of Dar es Saalam, the upland air of Mwanza was clear and dry. I hired an old Land Rover from the rental desk at the airport and set off on the two hour drive to the mine.

After a while the bitumen gave way to dirt. The landscape was dotted with small subsistence farms and there was little of the picture-book Africa to see. Occasionally I passed a donkey cart. Dogs and big marabou storks squabbled and scavenged at rubbish tips on the outskirts of simple villages. Children herded rangy cattle and goats this way and that.

I didn’t know what to expect, but I wasn’t prepared for my reception at the mine. The entrance appeared in the distance at the end of a long straight stretch of road. A high cyclone fence topped with razor wire crossed the road at right angles and stretched out into the distance on either side.

A sign said “Fortitude Mine – No Unauthorised Entry”. Sturdy gates barred the road and a couple of Africans in blue-grey uniforms were sitting on plastic chairs outside a little



cement-rendered guard house.

I pulled up, but I left the motor running and I didn't get out. The two men came over and eyed me hungrily. They carried batons and one had a pump-action shotgun.

"I've come to see the security manager – Nick Possum is my name." I smiled politely and showed them a business card. Neither said anything. One peered into the back of the vehicle and the other walked off for some distance and made a call on his two-way radio. Then he walked back.

"Okay, you right to go through now. You see Mister Apthorpe-Burton right away".

They swung the big gates open and I drove through. Security seemed excessive, but it was, after all, a gold mine. Who was Apthorpe-Burton?

After a couple of kilometres I saw the mine buildings up ahead. There was another perimeter fence and another guard-house, but this time the guards didn't want to talk. They pointed out an office with a wide verandah not far away, at the edge of a jumble of sheds.

I parked outside in the shade of an acacia tree, collected my thoughts, and knocked on the door marked "Richard Apthorpe-Burton – Security Manager".

"Come!"

I walked in. It was not a big office. A florid Englishman in his mid-thirties approached me. He had a ginger moustache and beads of sweat glistened on his shaved head. I reached for his outstretched hand. It was slick with sweat and he crushed my paw with enthusiasm.

I glanced around the room. Along one wall there was a gun-rack with a dozen pump-action shotguns and some old Belgian SLRs secured with a chrome-plated chain threaded through the trigger guards. The opposite wall was almost filled by a big whiteboard with a roster for something like 200 guards.

On Apthorpe-Burton's desk was a framed photo of himself in the uniform of a British Army subaltern and a wicked-looking crossbow with which he had evidently been tinkering when I arrived. Weight-lifting gear was stacked in a dusty corner.

"You must be a friend of Bruce Possum. You've come a little too late I'm afraid. Sit down." He motioned me to a spare office chair.

"Bruce and I were in the private eye business for years. He disappeared in 1988. I heard he was here."

"I'm awfully sorry. He resigned in December and joined the government forces in the Congo. A couple of days ago we got word he was dead. Official, I'm afraid." He riffled through his in-tray and pulled out a sheet of paper which he handed me.

It was a fax from Kinshasa on the letterhead of the République Démocratique du Congo. I scratched through it with my high school French. The armed forces of the republic regretted to inform the recipient that Major Bruce Possum had been killed in action near Bukavu on 24 December, 2000. As this was his only known address, would the recipient please make endeavours to contact the next-of-kin.

So this was the end of the line. I was too late. I sat speechless for a couple of minutes, staring at the words on the page. "Did you know him?" I asked.

"Only for a couple of days. Interesting chap, but he didn't say much about himself. Don't meet many possums."

**The two men came over and eyed me hungrily. They carried batons and one had a pump-action shotgun.**





“So everybody says.”

Apthorpe-Burton sat behind his desk fidgeting. It was obvious he knew nothing about Bruce Possum. Why would he? He signs up for a shitty but fabulously-paid job as security manager at a gold mine in Tanzania, flies out from England, says hi to his predecessor and gets a couple of tips on the job. Then there’s a fax saying Bruce has been killed in the Congo. That’s the mercenary game. That’s Africa.

I was wondering why I’d bothered to come. Then he spoke.

“Bruce left some of his stuff here. There isn’t much. He said he’d come back for it.” Hope sunk its teeth in my tail. I tried not to betray my excitement.

“Perhaps you’d like to take it off our hands. We’ll pay the excess baggage. When are you flying back?”

I told him I’d kill to be on the next flight to Dar es Salaam and the next out of it. He kindly offered to make the arrangements and called his secretary. I’d missed the last flight from Mwanza, but there was one in the morning and it connected with an Air Emirates flight out of Dar. They could book me into a motel in Mwanza. I thanked him profusely.

Then he led me to a little cement-rendered cabin with an iron roof. It was furnished like a motel room. The air-con had been off for days and it was stiflingly hot. Bruce’s stuff was in a big old suitcase on the kitchenette table.

Apthorpe-Burton turned on the air-con and took his leave. I spread the contents out. It looked like the crap you see on the one dollar table at a suburban garage sale.

There were a few transit lounge novels, copies of *Soldier of Fortune* and *Penthouse* magazines, self-help tomes, a Bullworker, a few letters, an old down jacket, a cardboard mailing tube, some cheap desk accessories.

The letters were secured with a bulldog clip. Love letters of no consequence, written in broken English and addressed to “Big Ears”. Each was a only a few lines of affectionate gibberish on perfumed paper signed by somebody called Franca. I skimmed through them. A couple were dated 1997, but there were no envelopes and she hadn’t bothered to include her address.

Tucked inside a copy of *The Power of Positive*

*Thinking* I found just two photos of Bruce. In one he was with Alan Bond, in the other with some woman I didn’t recognise at a café by the beach somewhere in Perth. Both were very old. They must have been taken before Bruce disappeared.

The mailing tube contained a couple of rolled-up oil paintings and a note on yellowing paper. It read: “Look after these for me mate”.

I rolled them out on the table. Sunflowers in the style of Van Gogh – the sort of thing you can pick up at any art school sale. Whatever joker did them had signed them “Vincent” at the bottom.

A wave of disappointment swept over me. It was all stale, banal, generic. I had hoped, at least, for some clues as to where Bruce had been and what he had been up to for all these years, but there was almost nothing to go on.

But why should there be? It made sense. A man on the run doesn’t accumulate much, and perhaps he had taken his more revealing detritus to the Congo.



**Sunflowers in the style of Van Gogh – the sort of thing you can pick up at any art school sale. Whatever joker did them had signed them “Vincent” at the bottom.**



I lugged his suitcase back to the hired Landrover. Apthorpe-Burton handed me an envelope stuffed with Tanzanian Shilling for the excess baggage. I thanked him again and shook his sweaty hand.

I didn't bother looking back at the Fortitude Mine. Even in the rear view mirror all you could see was the dust from the road.

For the fun of it, I took a slightly different route back to Mwanza. It isn't every day you go to Africa.

I was barrelling down the dirt road when the motor died. I coasted to a stop. It was probably a blocked fuel line. I'd been there about an hour, and the sun was low, when some French aid workers from the UNHCR stopped to help. There was nothing they could do except get a mechanic from the hire company to come out in the morning.

"Land Rovers. *Merde!*", one said, "If you leave 'er 'ere, ze locals they strip 'er before morning. But not if you are 'ere. They are 'armless. You will be quite safe."

They disappeared down the road. When night came, I lay down in the back of the truck. The stars blazed out of the sky, and the crickets and frogs sung an insidious chorus. How irritating to have this happen and to miss my flight to Dar and the plane home. Up till now everything had run so smoothly.

Except for the crucial thing: I had not found Bruce Possum, and the junk he left behind whispered not a new word about him. I now knew he had found his way to Africa and died on a desperate mercenary gig, but everything was so pat, so bland. It had been like surfing on a big warm wave.

Suddenly I felt like a character in an Evelyn Waugh novel: pushed around the landscape; manipulated by Fate. But it wasn't like the Gods were laughing as they rolled the dice. There were no rough edges. Fate had been smooth and comforting. Everything neatly fitted my expectations – my picture of Bruce – until the motor died and a real act of fate intervened. It occurred to me that I was being, somehow, conned.

I got back to Dar es Salaam late the next day, hailed a cab at the airport and asked to go to the Old Africa Hotel.

"Boss, dat's bin closed two months. They're rebuildin' it. Why don' I take you to the New Africa?"

A spasm of paranoia ran down my tail. "That can't be right ... I stayed there less than a week ago. The woman never said they were closing. Take me past there."

He shrugged as if I was some kind of idiot.

Sure enough, there was a construction fence around the Old Africa. Most of the window frames were gone. The foyer where I had walked a couple of days before was an empty shell. My mouth went dry with fear. "Yeah, you're right. I must be goin' nuts. Take me to the New Africa."

I checked in under an assumed name, paid in cash. Then I rang South Africa Airways and booked on the next flight out.

Oh yes. Ever since Perth I'd been played for a complete sucker. Lured to Dar ... conned by a few actors in a derelict pub ... led on to the Fortitude mine where Apthorpe-Burton had spun me a yarn about Bruce and packed me off with this suitcase full of junk he claimed were Bruce's belongings. He'd even booked me on a plane back to Australia. Very slick.

I had a vision of a crew of thugs waiting for me to lug the suitcase out of the terminal at Mascot. When I wasn't on that flight they'd go ballistic. Soon they'd be looking for me everywhere.

I opened the suitcase and rifled through Bruce's stuff again. There was no cocaine concealed in the lining, no jewels or currency.



It was, in fact, just junk. The love letters could have been scrawled the day before I arrived, the old snaps of Bruce were taken before he disappeared. That left the paintings. I looked at them with new eyes. As fake Van Goghs go, they were actually very good. Were my paws holding the real thing? I turned them over. The canvas did look old. They'd been cut off the stretcher with a sharp blade. If they'd have been any hotter they would have set fire to my fur.

I put them back in the mailing tube, pocketed the photos and a couple of the love letters, and took the rest of the junk down the fire stairs. I dumped it in a rubbish skip, then I stayed up all night, waiting for a knock on the door that never came.

I checked out at 6 am and hung round the streets until the post office opened, when I mailed the paintings anonymously to my friend Tim, the Canberra art historian. I got to the airport at the last moment and made it onto my flight, feeling lucky to get out of Tanzania alive.





# The Great Crusade

*When I was coming up, it was a dangerous world and we knew exactly who the 'they' were. It was us versus them, and it was clear who they were. Today we're not so sure who 'they' are, but we know they're there."*

George W. Bush (1999)

■ October 2001

I was lucky to get a room at the Hotel Tajikistan in downtown Dushanbe. Since George Dubya announced the Great Crusade it had been hard to get a room anywhere in Central Asia. The US State Department, the CIA, the British Foreign Office and various "adventure travel" companies operating as fronts for everything from the SAS to the New York Police were block-booking anything with running water and even B-grade backpacker hostels.

"You are most lucky we have a cancellation", the young Tajik man remarked as he carried my pack to 6th floor. "Osama bin Laden himself stayed in this very room in 1992, during the troubles, when we are fighting the Leninabaders".

"So where is Osama now?" I asked casually.

"I have reliably heard he is in Malaysia with Dr Mathahir".

I tipped him a few Tajik rubl and wondered if my quest for Bruce Possum was as futile the hunt for bin Laden, or the war on Afghanistan, or whatever it was that the West was doing.

Over the years, more rumours of Bruce have come out of Central Asia than anywhere else, so when Sergi, my well-placed contact in St Petersburg, emailed me with a new lead, I was drawn to Tajikistan as if by marsupial instinct.

*I am talking to officer I know*

*from our 201st Armoured Division in Tajikistan who are patrolling border Afghanistan. He met Australian possum who is in some way connected with anti-Taliban of Northern Alliance, he thinks perhaps as drug-runner or supply guns. After the attacks on America there are now many Americans there and also British commando forces. Perhaps is not a good time to go.*

I took Bruce's last note out of my wallet. It was grubby and faded now. I found it in '88 after he vanished, taped to the lid of the tin box in which he kept his 9 mm Browning: *So long partner, Have gone to Afghanistan. Sorry, will make it up to you. Keep the gat.* I knew the words by heart, they looked like they always did.

The downstairs bar was full of Russian soldiers, CIA operatives, British SAS types, French spooks posing as archaeologists and Pakistani spooks posing as journalists. The



**"I buy everybody drink in honour of Great American Crusade against Yislam!" roared Evgeny.**



ceiling was still pock-marked with bullet holes from the last time the boys from the 201st Division let off steam.

I was ordering a cider from an impassive barman when a Russian officer weaved towards me. “Afstraliya, da? *Kak vas zavut?* Your name? I am Evgeny. I have cousin in Bondi. What brings you to yis place.”

Evgeny looked as good a place as any to start. “Nick, Nick Possum. I’m looking for my business partner, Bruce Possum. He disappeared in 1988. I think he might be here, or in Afghanistan”. I thought I saw a flicker of interest cross the barman’s face.

“Possum? Dushanbe? *Nyet*”. Evgeny slapped me on the back and laughed uproariously. “I am only knowing you are possum from Afstraliya because picture book my cousin send. Perhaps you will have more luck near the border, but there yis much danger.

“The Americans are welcome to Afghanistan. Yis pippie all crazy, you know. We give Americans air base, whatever. Our President Putin says he will give arms to Northern Alliance ... but you know this: we have been giving them for years! So nothink change. Except now you fight our war to secure Russian border here! And you give us, how you say, *free hand*, in Chechenya, so your Chechen freedom fighters of yesterday become now our terrorists today, *da?*”

A middle-aged man who looked like a process-server sat gloomily over a whiskey. I asked him if he had a role in the Great Crusade.

“Yeah, I’m a process-server. Gotta FBI warrant for Mr bin Laden. Don’t happen to know where I can find him, do you?” A weak smile crossed his face.

“The bell boy says he’s in Malaysia. You’ve got a bumner of a job. How did you get it?” I asked.

“Oh, I volunteered. See, I know bin Laden. Met him a few years back when his brother, Salem, was George W. Bush’s partner in George’s failed Persian Gulf oil venture.”

“It’s a small world isn’t it? Get any leads from the other brothers? The ones that lived in Boston?”

“No luck. They complained that he never keeps in touch these days ... not even a postcard.”

“I buy everybody drink in yonour of Great American Crusade against Yislam!” roared Evgeny.

#### ■ December 2001

Our little aid convoy crawled on across the dusty windswept plain towards snow-covered mountains. We were now deep inside Afghanistan. The safety of the Hotel Tajikistan seemed light-years behind.

I had spent futile days in Dushanbe inquiring after Bruce Possum. Everybody was helpful and misleading or impassive and hostile in a way I couldn’t quite put my paw on.

And there had been unsettling incidents. The CIA black operations boys, who had all the rooms on the eighth floor, stuck one of those old-time recruiting posters that say “Uncle Sam Needs You” up in the bar. By the next day someone had defaced it with a texta. A turban and a long black islamist beard had been drawn on the pointing figure of Uncle Sam and the slogan now read “Uncle OSamA Needs You”.

That night, a note was slipped under my door.

*“The Possum you seek he is in Afghanistan. He does the deal in Opium for the Northern Alliance. The Talibs too. I have last seen him on Kabul Road.”*

There was only one thing for it. I looked up Ronnie, a morose but garrulous Scot, who I’d met in the bar and who’d told me he was leading the last aid convoy to leave Dushanbe.

On the surface, he was a logistics officer with the Unified Afghan Aid Appeal, something vaguely to do with British churches. I trusted him, in a strange way, although I had



learned that nobody in Dushanbe was quite what they seemed.

“Why Afghanistan?” I asked as our overloaded truck inched southward.

“It runs in the family. We’ve been coming here since the 1830s. My Grrreat, Grrreat, Grrreat Grrrandfather, Angus, was in the disastrous 1839 invasion. He didn’t get out alive.

“Then my Grrreat, Grrreat, Grrrandfather, Hamish, was with General Rrroberts in the 1878 invasion. The Pathans shot him at the Battle of Maiwand. Grrreat Grrrandfather Lachlan, he was with the Rrroyal Air Force, when they carpet bombed Kabul in 1920.”

“They bombed Kabul way back then?”

“Ahrrrr you bet! Lachlan was a bombardier on the big Handley-Page V, the wurrlds first four-engined bomber. Didn’t finished them in time for Wurrld War One, but they flew one out to bomb the Afghans. He was murdered by some Pathans in the bazaar in Peshawar. Grrrandfather was with the Indian Police on the Northwest Frrrontier. He got killed falling off his horse in 1945. We always won, sort of, but nothing ever changed.”

“And your dad? What did he die of?” I asked. I was beginning to get a bad feeling about the family’s luck.

“Cirrrosis of the liver. Whisky, you know, the white man’s burden.”

We passed a battery of Russian howitzers behind a low rise and halted at the final Northern Alliance checkpoint before crossing over into Taliban territory. The commander radioed to the Taliban roadblock a couple of kilometres ahead.

I got out to stretch my tail. About a hundred men were squatting in a circle and a heated debate was going on.

Our Afghan driver chatted shyly to one of the men on the edge of the group. I asked what was going on.

“Now they are thinking whether to join the Talibs. They are not liking the English to come here again and are ag-grieved the Americans are not giving them air support”, he whispered.



**“ ... Our national team have gone to a first innings lead, Praise be Allah. Alam Khan has scored elegant 85, with 15 boundaries.”**

The commander waved us on. Just over the crest, crumbling trenches zig-zagged away on either side of the road, manned by a smattering of men with Kalashnikovs.

When we reached the Taliban checkpoint it turned out to be a crude wooden barricade laced with barbed wire not far from a little teahouse. Angus and the driver spoke to the man in charge.

“They are Talibs now, but they are in confusion”, the driver said to me. “Perhaps they will cross over to the Alliance. They are meeting to decide.”

Outside the teahouse, a blind man was selling the emergency ration packs the US air force had been dropping in the valley. I bought a couple for the buckwheat stew. “Osama bin Laden himself drank tea here”, he said.

Inside, some Taliban fighters were huddled anxiously around a little radio. “You are an Australian Possum”, said one of them, in passable English.

“How did you know?” I asked, sipping sweet tea and wondering if Bruce had passed this way.

“My cousin, he lives in Sydney. Arncliffe. Near the park.” Suddenly there was wild cheering. I asked him what had happened.

“Now we are doing well against the NA.”

“You have a victory against the Northern Alliance?”

“Oh no! Not the Northern Alliance, but the Northern Areas of Pakistan in the Quaid-e-Azam Cricket Trophy. Our national team have gone to a first innings lead, Praise be Allah. Alam Khan has scored elegant 85, with 15 boundaries.”



Day after day, Kabul's dusty streets shook from bombing and the rumble of artillery crept closer.

My obsession with finding Bruce had become dangerously mad, I reflected. Since arriving with the aid convoy from Tajikistan I'd taken a room in a backpackers hostel that had seen better decades and spent weeks shuffling around a crazy city under siege, visiting tea houses and half-deserted government offices asking after Bruce.

Eventually, one evening, a nervous Taliban in threadbare cleric's garb came to the hostel and told me I must follow him to the office of the security police. "By yourself only", he said, ominously.

The offices were guarded by a clutch of jittery fighters draped about with Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenades. In the courtyard others were burning documents and loading boxes of ammunition into a fleet of battered trucks. The smell of retreat was in the air.

The young mullah into whose half-ransacked office I was escorted spoke English with a London accent. He offered me a chair and a bottle of mineral water.

"You have not found the possum you are looking for", he observed. He had the security apparatchik's cold, sly smile.

"No, I've asked after Bruce all over town. I was wondering why you hadn't called me in earlier. You must think I'm stone crazy coming here at a time like this. I'm surprised I haven't been arrested as a spy."

"Oh, there's no mystery. We know you're not a spy. In fact, we know all about you – our cause has many ears, and they are bigger than yours, furry one. We also are looking for Bruce because he double-crossed us. For years, while we were fighting the Northern Alliance, he was arranging to sell our opium crop abroad. Then we took the Americans' money to end the opium trade. We stopped the farmers growing poppies and gave your friend a million US dollars to leave Afghanistan and go away. But then we find he is selling opium for the



**"Yours?" I asked, astonished. "I thought your mob was against music".**

Northern Alliance. Also, he knows a lot about us and we think he has come back to Kabul undercover, to work for that dog Rabbani. We thought perhaps he would seek you out, and we could catch him, but he didn't, and now it's too late ... we're leaving Kabul tonight, to go to the hills."

I wasn't surprised. It made a lot of sense. Why sit in trenches where the Americans can bomb you to dust. Much better to split up, go back to the mountains and villages and bide your time.

"What will you do with Bruce when you find him?" he asked.

"Oh, I'll probably just ask him where he's been for all these years. I only want to understand why he's turned out the way he has. And you, what would you have done with him?" A smart bomb thumped in not more than a couple of kilometres away. We both flinched, the building shook.

"Probably we would have just, ah, *persuaded* him to tell who his accomplices were, then hung him, out in the courtyard there, where we have hung many others", he said distractedly.

"Do you have a file on Bruce?" I asked.

"It's been sent to Kandahar already. Perhaps, *insha Allah*, if it, and I, survive all this, I will send it you a copy."



I handed him my business card. "I have something else here you might like to take", he said. He swung open the door of an ancient safe behind his desk and took out a faded shoebox.

It was full of old Cat Stevens tapes and CDs.

"Yours?" I asked, astonished. "I thought your mob was against music".

"Ah well, it made sense at the time. But Stevens was a brother ... I mean, it wasn't as if I'd been a Lou Reed fan."

"And why the burqa? the way you treated women? why all that?"

"It's somewhere in the Koran, I think. But don't ask me. I'm just a technical mullah. I do confessions, I don't do theology."

"Where do you think Osama bin Laden has gone?" I asked, pushing my luck too far.

"He died of kidney failure, here in Kabul, a week ago. In July, when he checked into the American Hospital in Dubai, it was his last hurrah. He has gone to meet Allah."

And in the morning the Taliban were indeed gone. I heard the clanking of tank tracks in the street below, and men shouting and cheering. I walked to the hostel door and pushed my way past a cheering crowd of Uzbeks and Hazaras lining the side of the road.

A CNN news crew in the back of a pickup truck were driving ahead of the crowd filming it as it surged alongside a small party of Northern Alliance soldiers with an old Russian tank. A lone young woman who had thrown off her burqa was striding along with the men and boys.

"This is a great day for us, stranger", a man in dark glasses and a black leather jacket said to me.

"Yes indeed, it's nice to see a woman without the burqa", I said.

"That is just for the reporters of CNN", he replied "We know who she is. We will kill her later".

#### ■ August 2002

Months later, I was still brooding over my exit from Afghanistan. The teenage editors of a satirical fortnightly, *The Chaser*, which had sponsored my expedition to Afghanistan, had withdrawn my press credentials and abandoned me in Kabul without warning or explanation.

It was, I felt, the most treacherous betrayal of a working journalist in a war zone since Jan Wenner stranded Hunter S. Thompson in Saigon in April '75, but Joadja was more sanguine.

"Them's the breaks", she said. "Remember that you too, were a callow young possum once. Anyway, I was glad to have you back. If they hadn't pulled your credentials you might still be in Kabul, or even a shallow grave."

I stared out the window of the Brushtail Café and grunted into my cider. All that was true enough, but I still felt I had been cheated of my quarry. Maybe, just maybe, given another week in Kabul, I might have cornered Bruce and got some satisfaction out of him, but I was the one who got cornered.

I had at least confirmed that Bruce was selling the Afghan opium crop for a shadowy coalition of NA warlords. That much the Taliban apparatchik told me before he departed for the mountains, or Pakistan, or Chechenya or maybe even Yemen, leaving me with his box of old Cat Stevens tapes and a promise to post me his Bruce Possum file if he made it out alive.

A few days after I spoke to the Taliban apparatchik a squad of British troops arrived at the seedy backpackers hostel where I was holed up. They told me they had orders to put me on the first plane to Pakistan. I explained I was a fully accredited journalist for an impor-



**A spectral figure in a burqa loomed in front of me, silhouetted like a black ghost.**

honey and throw him to the lesbians?” one of the squaddies asked. He had the fat florid face of a soccer hooligan. His mates snickered. They pulled a black bag over my head, tied my paws and thrust me face-down in the back of a jeep.

After a long bumpy ride we stopped. They dragged me out and frog-marched me somewhere, pushed me into a wall. I heard a steel door clang shut. A couple of hours passed. I could hear aircraft nearby.

Then I heard the door open and the sound of feet and voices. Somebody untied my paws and pulled the bag off my head.

I was in a bare little cell with no windows and a barred door. A spectral figure in a burqa loomed in front of me, silhouetted like a black ghost. She was flanked by a couple of General Dostum's soldiers. I stayed motionless, blinking. The figure behind the burqa looked at me for perhaps thirty seconds. I was too shocked to speak, and none of them said a word.

Then she muttered something, turned and shuffled out of the cell, followed by the soldiers. I could have sworn she said “loser”. The door slammed shut, the dust on the floor stirred in the weak light, their footsteps scuffled away and then there was silence. There on the floor, where the burqa-clad figure had stood, lay an apple core. I shuffled over to it, picked it up, and turned it over in my paw. On it were the unmistakable teeth marks of a possum.

**TO BE CONTINUED ...**

tant Australian newspaper which was read avidly by many influential people.

“Save it for the judge, laddie”, the sergeant said, “Your embassy in Pakistan says the paper sacked you a couple of weeks ago. You can come with us or you can explain it to the Yanks at Guantanamo Bay”.

They started ransacking my room, throwing everything into a big garbage bag. I explained there must be a mistake and insisted on seeing a representative of the Australian diplomatic service. One of them twisted my arm behind my back, threw me to the ground and dragged me out into the street by my tail. “You’ll be hearing from my Sydney lawyers ... they’ve got Cherie Blair on a retainer”, I screeched.

“Why don’t we dip the furry little cunt in